

## Crip teleportation: the animal that therefore I am—or I am not

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how disabled body-minds are discursively dehumanized or superhumanized. It draws on Critical Disability Studies and the Crip Studies scholarship and focuses on invisible mental disabilities, mainly those of the neurodiversity spectrum. The efforts of animalization and super-humanization draw on a mechanism that resonates with Parmenides's Zeno paradox. As the autistic scholar Melanie Yergeau (2018) discusses, a neuroqueer body-mind is always in constant motion, being relocated from one identity category to another, from humanity to animality and vice-versa, subject to an excessively strict rhetoric model. Concomitantly, animals in slaughtering facilities are humanized to make their deaths seem smoother. To short-circuit the models that evaluate how fit human and animal bodies are for the neoliberal guidelines of productivity, the paper also brings Jasbir Puar's intersectional approach on capacity and debility into the discussion.

**Keywords:** Animal studies. Neurodiversity. Neurodivergence. Crip studies. Demi-rhetoric.

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### **Teletransporte Crip: o animal que logo sou – ou não**

**Resumo:** Neste ensaio, examino como os corpos [humanos ou não] portadores de deficiência sofrem uma dupla tendência discursiva de desumanização e super-humanização. A abordagem parte dos *Critical Disability Studies* e dos *Crip Studies*, focando principalmente deficiências invisíveis, como o espectro da neurodiversidade. O argumento é que os esforços animalizantes e supra-humanizantes alimentam um mecanismo de constante deslocamento identitário que ressoa com o Paradoxo de Zeno, de Parmênides, e é calcado em um aparato retórico-comunicacional excessivamente restrito. Como a pesquisadora autista Melanie Yergeau discute, um corpo *neuroqueer* vive constantemente sendo realocado, de uma categoria identitária a outra, da humanidade à animalidade e vice-versa. Concomitantemente, animais em matadouros passam por um processo de humanização que visa fazer com que suas mortes pareçam mais justificáveis e “suaves”. Para provocar um curto-circuito nos modelos que paulatinamente avaliam o quão preparados os corpos humanos e animais estão, de acordo com as normas neoliberais de produtividade, trago a abordagem interseccional de Jasbir Puar, em especial sua discussão sobre a capacidade e a debilidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Estudos animais. *Crip Studies*. Neurodiversidade. Neurodivergência. Demi-retórica.

I wanna live like common people  
I wanna do whatever common people do  
Wanna sleep with common people  
I wanna sleep with common people  
Like you  
Pulp – *Common People*

This paper brings into focus familiar discursive tropes that animalize and superhumanize (invisibly) disabled body-minds. I do not approach the particularities of neurodiverse perceptions themselves due to space constraints. Nevertheless, these topics have been discussed elsewhere (cf. TRENTO, 2020). There are growing sources of information on the matter (KAPP, 2020). Nonhuman animals are humanized as an effective strategy to propel the industry of animal killing, while invisibly disabled human bodies are animalized to de-potentialize their societal agency. A constant reallocation of human and nonhuman entities into the continuum of life is sustained by an onto-epistemological concept of difference that urges us to separate human and nonhuman entities. I vouch for an ecological conceptualization of difference as a continuum, and I propose the dissolution of the human-animal divide, in favor of a mutually inclusive model of difference (MASSUMI, 2014).

There is a constant stigmatization of neuroqueer individuals—those on the spectrum of neurodiversity regardless of their gender and sexuality but capable of queering the normative modes of existence—they are frequently cast as incapable of engaging in work, romantic relationships, or sociality at all. This system of exclusion triggered the emergence of the neurodiversity activist movement in the nineties. The neurodiversity paradigm, which surfaced in autistic self-advocacy communities, focuses on understanding some mental disabilities not as deficits but as natural variations of human diversity (cf. KAPP, 2020) while recognizing the biomedical and sociological causality involved with them. Therefore, people on the spectrum of autism and other disabilities are impaired because societal constraints do not favor the nonneurotypical subjectivities.

Along with neurodiversity activism, other affirmative approaches towards visible and invisible disabilities emerged. Individuals who iden-

tify as disabled, for instance, re-appropriated the term ‘crip’ to refer to their own subjectivities. As Sami Shalck (2013, n.p.) disserted, the term “is shorthand for the word ‘cripple’ which has been (and is) used as an insult toward people with disabilities, but which has been re-appropriated as an intra-group term of empowerment and solidarity”. Crip theory, as a discipline, emerged in the last decades, and it usually builds on the intersection between Critical Disability Studies and Queer Theory. If the previously offensive interpellation ‘queer’ was appropriated by academia and activism to value the nonnormative subjectivities and their potential to disrupt the status quo (BUTLER, 2011), a similar movement happened with the ‘crip’ bodies – including bodies that are also queer. A crip politics that “resists the idea that we need to be recognized as productive beings to be of worth” (SOMERS; SOLDATIC, 2020, p. 48). Crip theory, in terms of the range of its activism towards not only human bodies, may find its inspiration in affirmations like “mobilizing for an interspecies right to be nonproductive, to be lazy, may be an act of resistance to neoliberal intensification and its dispossessive structures, as Taylor, Grover, and Piggott, and Mitchell and Snyder have argued” (ibid., p. 49).

Several ongoing academic discussions problematize how medicine can welcome and learn with the neurodiversity movement (NICOLAIDIS, 2012). I do not focus on the medical but the societal pole of neurodiversity, which encompasses bodily-discursive exclusion mechanisms. I try to understand how the ableism stigmatization is, on its conceptual level, interspecific. Ableism is a “system of causal relations about the order of life that produces processes and systems of entitlement and exclusion. This causality fosters conditions of microaggression, internalized ableism and, in their jostling, notions of (un) encumbrance” (CAMPBELL 2017, p. 287-288). Ableism separates and hierarchize the able and the disabled bodies, and its discursive practices forge these binary categories. This exclusion feeds on several elements, including the design of physical spaces, the requirements of working life and its schedules and productivity targets, and a societal arrangement focused on the sole understanding of rhetoric and language restricted to the—clearly—spoken word. One could say that human behavior should be standardized for the safety of all beings. However, when talking about mental disabilities, one must consider that they are not always apparent and consistently seen through the ‘bare eyes’ of a neurotypical individual.

As I also stated elsewhere (TRENTO, 2020), one useful schema for understanding the constant shifting of neuroqueer bodies into animal-

ty and the super-humanity is the Parmenides' Zeno Paradox, as conceptualized by the autistic queer scholar Melanie Yergeau (2018). In some situations, one is considered too neurodiverse for specific tasks or jobs, having their intelligence as well as their capacity to deliver timely results contested (TRENTO, 2020). In familiar tropes, neurodiverse bodies are superhumanized—'they are possessors of a high level of intelligence'—, or animalized—they have 'their own world and cannot attach or properly detect social cues as the human language'. The issue resides on the epistemic level, where some of these behavioral and social categories are designed to describe and separate the human from the continuum of animality, and more generally, from life itself. This categorization is only one more facet of the modern epistemological divides and the machines of the macropolitical segmentarity that produces binary pairs as the human-non-human, male-female, godly-profane, subject-object, able-disabled (cf. DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987). "Is it possible that the very subjects central to posthumanist inquiry—the binarisms of human/animal, nature/culture, animate/inanimate, organic/inorganic—find their relief outside of the epistemological locus of the West?" (PUAR, 2017, p. 30).

Many western discursivities suggest that nonhuman animals do not have any volition or intentionality—please note that I do not refer to an intentionality solely focused on a transcendental subject. The ecofeminist scholar Val Plumwood (LINDGREN; ÖHMAN, 2019, p. 1206) affirms that a problem of the "dominating human-centred paradigm is the reductive stance, which aims to reduce the intentionality and agency of 'earth others'. Such a position has underprivileged our sensitivity and perception of animals in order to exploit them more". While the innovative studies show the opposite, they are still seen as possessors of an inferior kind of agency—, but agency is distributed and not fixed on a singular human or nonhuman being (LINDGREN & ÖHMAN, 2019).

There are similar tropes involving those neurodiverse persons who are considered a-rhetorical and unintentional (cf. YERGEAU, 2018), particularly those who communicate through means other than typical speech. If in some situations they are read as incapable, in others, they are deemed to be too neurodiverse to provide statements and timely research about their conditions. This does not only apply to invisible disabilities (NAPLES; MAULDIN; DILLAWAY, 2019), as many pop narratives depict the disabled bodies as possessors of supernatural powers, like the Marvel character *The Daredevil*: "perhaps the most well-known cultural example is the belief that blind people's other senses may develop to superhuman

levels” (STANESCU; STANESCU, 2020, p. 168). However, as Melanie Yergeau (2018) proposes, even the neurodiverse persons who are supposedly capable of “passing as normal” are continually being shifted away from recognition of their rhetorical capabilities:

Indeed, the notion of an autism spectrum unto itself is a demi-rhetorical construct: individuals deemed low functioning are disqualified from rhetorical subjectivity because of their disabilities. But individuals deemed high-functioning are likewise disqualified from rhetorical subjectivity—because their autism re-sides, because they are too far from the autism pole but not close enough to the normalcy pole, because they never really progress to full-fledged allism, which requires an infinite number of steps. Whatever autistics intend—and how can we intend when our intentions are merely demi-intentions? —our arrival at rhetoricity can never be fully realized. (YERGEAU, 2018, p. 48)

These tropes of animalization and super humanization target disabled bodies. Nevertheless, they potentially affect any individual living under neoliberal societies based on productivism at all costs. Let us focus on a transversal understanding of invisible disabilities, which somehow affect everybody by the implementation of evaluation metrics and a constant urge for intensive productivity. Some of these tasks may affect some bodies differently, but ableism is on the horizon of all human and non-human life in the current era. There is a parallel with the animal industry and activism, which needs further exploration.

### **Animal farms and crip temporalities**

The recently published book compilation *Disability and Animality* (JENKINS *et al.*, 2020) discusses this sensitive intersection between animality and crip-disabled bodies, including comments on the invisible disabilities in animals and humans. As the interest of this paper relies on how to think about neurodivergence through the lens of a mutually inclusive conception of difference, it is imperative to clarify that there is a two-way problematic. The disabled human bodies are dehumanized and animalized, and the animals are subject to similar processes of bodily evaluation and classification based on neoliberal productivity.

The figure of Temple Grandin is central to examining the intersection between animality and neurodiversity. An autistic activist, she is perhaps the best-known enthusiast and researcher into techniques that make the killing of animals in the meat industry less harsh and violent. According to Wikipedia, “she is a prominent proponent for the *humane*

treatment of livestock for slaughter”. Grandin is a contradictory character, and the discourses she represents and vouches for were criticized by several autistic activists and Crip studies researchers. Grandin is famous for the development of the ‘squeezing machine’. Concomitantly, she is renowned for developing the “Double Rail Restrainer Conveyor for Livestock Handling” (GRANDIN, 1988) described in the abstract of an article published in the eighties:

A double rail restrainer conveyor has been operating for two years in a commercial calf slaughter plant. It is operating at a production rate of 300 small calves or 150 large veal calves/h. The calves straddle a moving double rail which supports them under the brisket and belly. The moving rail is formed from metal segments which are attached to an endless chain. Adjustable sides on each side of the conveyor can be rapidly positioned to accommodate different sized animals while the slaughter line is running. (GRANDIN, 1988, p. 327)

Following the development of the restrainer device, Grandin got exponentially famous both in the animal handling industry and in the circles of autistic-spectrum activism. Specifically, many people who work in the meat industry asked why Temple Grandin was “chosen” to speak on behalf of the slaughtered animals. Indeed, Grandin has a history of long-term development of research on reducing animal suffering in slaughterhouses. However, some scholars argue that there are some implied discursivities on that choice referring to the tokenization of neurodiverse individuals.

Tokenization consists of taking one or several individuals as to be “seen as spokespersons or feel compelled to disclose their own experiences as ‘teachable moments’” (MCKINNEY, 2014, p. 127). Tokenization is employed, in Grandin’s case, in favor of the strengthening of the rift between humans and animals, while the latter can also be seen to include disabled bodies:

As an autistic person, she uniquely thinks in the same way as nonhuman animals—as such, she can know what animals know and can, therefore, “translate” for others what animals think and want; (2) by enacting her suggested changes, factory farms can be, and indeed already have been, reformed in a manner that makes them humane to animals and an ethical choice for consumers; (3) her personal success helps to improve the understanding and acceptance of autistic people and, as such, she is seen by many to be implementing changes that are helpful to both animals and autistic people. (STANESCU; STANESCU, 2020, p. 162)

In a sense, Temple Grandin's status as the spokesperson for autism corroborates old claims of the animalization of neurodiverse bodies. Some affirmations have already proven to be false, like "autistic people lacking frontal lobes and having 'animal brains'" (STANESCU & STANESCU, 2020, p. 162). "Her persona functions incredibly effectively as a 'humane' façade for capitalist violence toward both autistic people and animals" (LION, 2020, p. 9). The process of the animalization of the human and the humanization of the animal both serve to augment the social control over the human and nonhuman bodies: "The classification and productive stratification of nonhuman animals are framed around similar ideas and materialities that measure and value the human body-and-mind. Who is able? How is this defined? What processes and social practices stratify bodies into systems of exchange and monetary value? Who has access to work and the social hierarchies that this brings?" (SOMERS; SOLDATIC, 2020, p. 44). If Temple Grandin lies on the continuum between the human and the animal, it is not due to the fact she is autistic, but because *everybody* lies on the same continuum of animality. As simple as it seems, while the methods of animal handling may bring some benefits, the only possible and foreseeable solution for animal suffering is the banishment of all animal slaughtering.

A tendency to superhumanize *some* individuals who are on the spectrum of autism is also noted. As de Hooze (2019) noted, forums focusing on what is defined as "aspie" supremacy thrive online. Autistics with Asperger's syndrome would all be savants and possessors of ultra-intelligence, according to how they are represented in mainstream media (READING, 2018). Only a small percentage of autistics are savants. These discourses may reinforce the supremacy of one type of autistic, putting the nonspeaking, so-called low functioning autistics, into a lower ontological class. It is vital to note that this supra-humanization of some bodies is also subject to gender and racial biases (cf. MATTHEWS, 2019): "aspies are not only seen as superiorly male, but as superiorly white. Usually, race is mentioned less overtly than sex" (DE HOOZE, 2019). Neurodiverse bodies are dehumanized and placed on one end of the continuum of animality and humanity. Since "the psychiatrist Hans Asperger in 1944 simultaneously developed a blueprint of the autistic person as machine-like in referring to autistic children as 'intelligent automata'" (READING, 2018, p. 117), they have eventually been superhumanized and situated on the other end, usually represented through a white, male, and morally superior *Übermensch*, trying to erase the queerness inherent to many neurodiverse subjectivities (cf. YERGEAU, 2018).



In the same compilation, I mentioned at the beginning of the text, Stanescu & Stanescu's (2020) article develops the argument that animals in meat factories are constantly crippled and evaluated. The right of cattle to continue existing is attached to the capacity they have for production, be it quantitatively, qualitatively, and in a timely fashion. These outcomes may be meat, milk, or other animal components. Animals undergo several modalities of screening and those whose results show they may, therefore, generate more expenses than income are sacrificed or put into sanctuaries. The sanctuary, where the old, exhausted, or disabled-but not "too" disabled-animals rest, is disconnected from the main facilities. According to Solmers and Soldatic (2020), "the placement of disabled animals in the sanctuary creates an image of 'the farm' as an infallible temple populated by intact, able bodies: body-minds which are able to perform productive work" (p. 39).

In the book *Authoring Autism*, Melanie Yergeau (2018, p. 51) has drawn an infographic depicting what they define as "crip teleportation". The graphic refers to the most common discursive tropes regarding neurodiverse persons. An ever-expanding line with arrows growing on opposite directions puts on one side the human and on the other the nonhuman. The pole of the human is characterized by the intensiveness of scarcity, while the pole of the nonhuman refers to excess. Autism is represented by a dot in the middle of the continuum. However, one neurodiverse individual is discursively situated on the left and the right pole, and as well in the middle of it. Sometimes their rhetoric is understood as the one of an animal, sometimes the one of a human. In another graphic (YERGEAU, 2018, p. 118), they clarify that these actions of constant dislodgement also are taken to diminish any modality of nonneurotypical behavior: one cannot be 'too quiet', "we can't hear you", 'almost loud', 'getting too loud' or 'way too LOUD'. One is expected to be precisely in the middle of the continuum of loudness.

Nevertheless, the academy must avoid falling into the trap of ontologizing a supposed rift that separates the human and the animal. On the contrary, one must work to demolish this onto-epistemological border. The work of Brian Massumi on animal politics is perhaps one of the most substantial efforts in that regard. Massumi's idea is that difference happens on a continuum. Difference is the result of the process of mutual inclusion, as opposed to the political models of the excluded middle, where the categories are forcefully separated. Temple Grandin "portrays herself and other autistic humans as a missing link on a continuum be-

tween able-minded humans and animals, evoking our species' evolution as animals in nature" (LION, 2020, p. 195). However, the discourses that support that false missing link are charged with the value of transcendental human exceptionalism (BRAIDOTTI, 2018).

### Techniques of inoperativity

To undo the riddle of an arrow always in movement, carrying one into animality and humanity, we must re-signify common tropes shared by human and nonhuman disabled bodies: that they are lazy, not-useful, and monetarily and emotionally costly (see YERGEAU, 2020). In my other work, I have proposed some techniques to enable failure as an ontological position by thinking-with the failing bodies (TRENTO, 2020). The failing bodies are the body-minds who cannot work regular hours or work at all according to the ableist neurotypical constraints of the market and are seen as burdens to the [welfare] state. They enact crip temporalities, the temporalities that can potentially disrupt the rift that separates disabled human and nonhuman beings.

It is important to note that, while some bodies are affected in different ways, the internalized laws of ableism affect every person—, “in neoliberal, biomedical, and biotechnological terms, the body is always debilitated in relation to its ever-expanding potentiality” (PUAR, 2017, p. 13). Some disabled bodies are selected to be the images of success, of overcoming disability, and the failure to attach to the dominant social cues is only considered if it leads to a pathway of success (TRENTO, 2020; HORTON, 2020). This selection is subject to several modalities of profiling, as “the capacitation of disabled bodies through circuits of (white) racial and economic privilege, citizenship status, and legal, medical, and social accommodations” (PUAR, 2017, p. 20).

As Jasbir Puar (2017) discusses in *The Right to Maim*, the approaches to the disabled and under-recognized bodies need to be made intersectional and divergent from the concept of identity. After all, displacement happens due to a constant reallocation—, but affirmation —, of fixed temporary identities, whereas queerness defies this crip teleportation. Which bodies can actively perform their cripness and can embrace failure without having the risk of becoming even more stigmatized, considering that the distribution of the systems of social security across the globe is unequal and far from perfectness? “Which debilitated bodies can be reinvigorated for neoliberalism, available and valuable enough for rehabilitation,

and which cannot be?” (PUAR, 2017, p. 13). When discussing the *It Gets Better Project*, a global initiative to reduce the number of suicides by queer individuals focusing on a discourse that the state of things is going to improve for people, Jasbir Puar (2017, p. 10) affirms that “a recapitulation machine” for a queer “white/liberal/male assemblage” will still feed a mechanism of slow death. The concept, as it is developed by the feminist scholar Lauren Berlant,

moves us away from the event of trauma or catastrophe, proposing that “slow death occupies the temporalities of the endemic”. This echoes the transformation of the epidemic into the endemic whereby, for Michel Foucault, writing in *Security, Territory, Population*, “death becomes durational”. Displacing military encounters, genocides, and other discrete time frames of traumatic events [...], slow death occurs not within the time scale of the crisis, not of the event of the suicide or the epidemic, but in “a zone of temporality [...] of ongoingness, getting by, and living on, where the structural inequalities are dispersed, the pacing of their experience intermittent, often in phenomena not prone to capture by a consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact. (PUAR, 2017, p. 11)

Without diving into the discussion of animal volition, the distribution of the practices towards unproductive cattle around the world varies intensively. One must ask, “Which debilitated bodies can be reinvigorated for neoliberalism, available and valuable enough for rehabilitation, and which cannot be?” (PUAR, 2017, p. 13). The animals waiting for their “peaceful deaths” in the sanctuary exist mainly to contrapose the ones who are clean, healthy and productive in the breeding and killing facilities until the source of disabled bodies is exhausted, leaving the environment populated only by perfect and productive bodies. In contrast, the massive “slow death” of animals continues globally, feeding off of the forced categorical separability between the able and the disabled and the human and the animal. As Evans (2020) highlighted, these practices of purification populate the neurodiverse persons’ daily life and the techniques of the heteroreproductive futurity already envision a world without neurodiversity thanks to the contingent potential of developing genetic tests to detect the chance that a child is born on the spectrum of neurodiversity.

This article offers more questions than answers. Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature situated at the intersections between visible or invisible disabilities and animal studies (PUAR, 2017; JENKINS *et al.*, 2020). Animal suffering and the displacement of neurodiverse bodies are two facets of an anthropotechnical machine that vouches to produce and standardize bodies and behaviors, mimicking the illusory control of hu-

mans over nature. Disability studies cannot reinforce human supremacy (PUAR, 2017). Finally, the title of this essay refers to the author's positionality as a neurodiverse subject and the struggle to attach to any identity position.

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